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ABSTRACT

Proceedings of a 1980 conference in Australia on the problems of first-year students, which focus on student discontinuation, are presented. The contents include three papers, discussion group reports, and a report on the outcome of the discussion groups, policy proposals, and recommendations. In "First Year Students: Selection and Attrition," J. F. Scott considers student selection, attrition, and dropout prevention. It is noted that a working party on attrition is seeking to find a system to promote the collection of progress statistics. In "Studies of First Year Students at the University of New South Wales," J. P. Powell suggests that the transition from school to university is substantially different from what the students had anticipated, and that choice of course, motivation, and the quality of the university experience appear to be the most important factors influencing decisions to withdraw. In "Proposed Solutions to Some Acknowledged Problems," Clive Williams outlines proposals that focus on students and their preparation and those that focus on the university experience. Discussion group reports address the following topics: pre-enrollment issues, nonacademic and academic transition problems, function of the first-year course, and educational responsibilities of universities. (SW)

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FIRST YEAR AT UNIVERSITY

Proceedings of a Conference held at The University of New South Wales 18 – 19 June 1980

Edited by D. J. Boud & E. A. de Rome

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CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION . . . . . *page* 1

PAPERS

First Year Students: Selection and Attrition,
Professor J.F. Scott 3

Studies of First Year Students at the University of
New South Wales, Dr J.P. Powell 9

Solutions to Some Acknowledged Problems, Dr Clive Williams. . 15

REPORTS

Discussion Group Reports

1. Pre-enrolment issues 22
2. Non-academic transition problems 24
3. Academic transition problems 27
4. The function of the first year course 29
5. Educational responsibilities of universities . . . 34

Report of the Working Party 37

INTRODUCTION

J.P.POWELL
TERTIARY EDUCATION RESEARCH CENTRE

For several years the Tertiary Education Research Centre has convened an annual conference on an educational topic of current concern. In 1980 it was decided to examine the problems of first year students with special attention being given to the phenomenon of student discontinuation.

The report of the Williams Committee drew attention to the needs of first year students and recommended that the AVCC establish a working party to examine attrition in the universities. The AVCC responded promptly and asked Professor J.F. Scott, Vice-Chancellor of La Trobe University, to chair the working party. It was therefore decided to invite Professor Scott to open the conference.

The problems of first year students have long been familiar to the staff of student counselling units. Dr. C. Williams, Director of Student Counselling at the University of Sydney - who is currently conducting a major study of first year students - was invited to be the other guest speaker.

The conference was designed to encourage not only the identification of problems but also the formulation of a set of policy proposals for dealing with them. Much of the work of the conference was conducted in small groups which were given the task of working on issues in a specific area. The reports of these groups, and a summary of research findings relating to the University of N.S.W., are included in these proceedings.

At the conclusion of the conference a working party was established to consider the outcomes of the discussion groups and to formulate policy proposals. The recommendations which emerged conclude these proceedings. They are very wide-ranging in scope and rich in detailed suggestions for possible lines of action. I feel sure that they will receive careful consideration both within this University and elsewhere. If the quality of students' experience of first year is enhanced as a result then the efforts of the conference participants will be more than justified.

FIRST YEAR STUDENTS: SELECTION AND ATTRITION

PROFESSOR J.F. SCOTT,
VICE-CHANCELLOR, LA TROBE UNIVERSITY

INTRODUCTION

I want to start by observing that it is impossible to judge the success or failure of an educative process until its end, and as nowadays even formal education is likely to occur in several phases during a person's life-time, it may be premature to assess someone's progress as a failure or wastage after one year. The drop-out at first year may become a great success as a mature-age student in another institution. My remarks will fall under three headings: selection, attrition and prevention.

SELECTION

All institutions select students. It may be by a conscious process of choosing those who have performed well in school examinations (for example, for Medicine and Law courses), it may be by expecting them to have passed only some minimum standard (for many general Arts courses) or it may be by an unconscious process of having set some expectation of ability that potential students have accepted. What is not clear are the objectives of the selection process.

Do we select students who are most likely to perform well at university? Or those who are likely to improve their performance most? Or do we select to provide as many graduates as possible with good employment prospects? Or do we produce graduates who are most useful to society as a whole?

I suspect the selection process is a mixture of these and other policies, but until it is clear what is the purpose of selection, it is only of doubtful value to analyse it further. Nevertheless, I shall assume that we want to select a group who are going to progress through first year with the best results at the end.

Much research has been carried out to find the best set of predictors of first year performance. Nearly all this evidence agrees that, for entry from school, the results of H.S.C. or similar examination are the best single predictors. They are never very good predictors and vary considerably with the field of study. H.S.C. scores have tended to show at their best in the Physical Sciences and Mathematics, with decreasing correlations through the Biological Sciences to the Social Sciences and Economics and are least valuable in the Humanities disciplines, where correlations are very low. This summary statement

is supported by a multitude of published research and by a variety of unpublished analysis carried out in individual institutions.

There are methodological dangers in laying too much weight on the interpretation of a simple correlation coefficient in this situation. The fact that correlations are calculated from a sample that has already been selected on the basis of the H.S.C. score means that some further assumptions are necessary before it can be applied to the whole population. Nevertheless, the consistent pattern of trends indicated above must indicate that caution should be exercised in using H.S.C. scores as predictors too rigorously. There is also some evidence to show that the correlation between H.S.C. and first year university performance is lowest at the very level where it is most relied upon, at the cut-off points (Smurthwaite, 1976). It is perhaps also interesting to notice that in those subjects where high entry scores are necessary and where the correlation might otherwise have been expected to be high, for example Medicine, it is often surprisingly low (Astin, 1975).

Many attempts have been made to supplement the predictive value of H.S.C. scores by using other information. Here the results are not so consistent. However, it is possible to generalise by saying that sex, motivation, personality type and school teachers' reports have all shown some correlation. These are usually low and do not add much to H.S.C. score, which remains the best single predictor.

There are dangers in carrying out vast statistical analyses of relevant and irrelevant information, which is so easy to do with modern computers. I can recall an analysis at a British university which occupied several years and which, among many other conclusions, noted in all seriousness that students whose surnames began with G, L and R performed well, while those which began with C, N and T did badly.

I would like to refer briefly to the report on selection procedures commissioned by the T.E.C. (Gibb, 1979). Professor Gibb discusses the great variety of academic qualifications of students now applying for entry to Australian universities and recommends the adoption of standard definitions for the various categories. He proposes that a conference of appropriate officers be held to reach agreement on these definitions. This seems timely, since comparisions of selection procedures are confused by differing nomenclature adopted in various States and institutions.

All this seems to point to the need for controlled and limited experimentation with selection procedures to gain first hand knowledge of alternatives. This process has already started. For many years now, most universities have had special entry schemes for unqualified, usually mature age, students. These have involved a variety of tests, interviews and assessments as the basis of selection. The evidence from individual universities suggests that these schemes have been successful in that such students have performed as well as, if not better than, students selected on the basis of H.S.C. scores.

Another interesting development is the scheme by which some entrants to the University of Newcastle medical school are selected not by H.S.C. score alone, but by using other supplementary information in addition. It will be fascinating to trace this group's subsequent performance.

Selection procedures are important because they obviously bear on the problems of attrition, that is, students leaving university through academic failure, disenchantment or a variety of other reasons.

ATTRITION

It is unfortunate that this word has come to be used in Australia in connection with what otherwise might be called progress rates. It has overtones that imply a persistant dwindling of student numbers and that all who leave universities without graduating have gained nothing. I believe we would be wrong to be led into the assumption that our aim is to reduce attrition rates to something approaching zero. Some who leave may have gained a worthwhile contribution to their education, or may return at a later stage. However, I shall use the work 'attrition' as it is now enshrined in the literature.

Statistics on attrition are particularly difficult to collect and over the years have become increasingly so. There has been a steady increase in the proportion of part-time students, and it is among these that genuine lack of progress is difficult to trace. Nowadays many students change their proportion of full-time load from year to year, deliberately take a year off studies to save money for the following year and so on. These reasons are not always explained to the administration and what appears as attrition may be the result of a carefully considered plan of study.

Not only are such statistics difficult to collect, but even harder to interpret. Inter-institutional comparisons are confounded by the varying degrees of diligence in following up students and by varying definitions. Within an institution, varying proportions of part-time students between departments make comparisons complicated. It may even affect failure rates since some departments work on the basis of a fixed percentage passing. There is often little attempt to differentiate between voluntary withdrawal and academic failure, and the classification is in any case arbitrary.

Many students now have a complicated pattern of full-time to part-time changes and measures such as completion in minimum time become less meaningful. Without immense effort it is difficult to account for those who transfer from one institution to another, possibly with a gap in between.

With a view to dealing with some, but not all, of these problems, the A.V.C.C. responded to the recommendation of the Williams report to set up a working party on attrition. I chair this working party, and its first task was to find a system for the collection of progress statistics on a routine basis which will enable comparisons to be made more reliably.

We are suggesting a new concept called the Student Progress Unit (S.P.U.). This is generated by the satisfactory completion of the workload for an academic year for a full-time student. It may be 2,3, 4 or more units or courses that must be passed. When this is compared to the load of

the student in terms of the weighted student unit (W.S.U.) generated by the enrolment, a genuine rate of progress is achieved. Thus a full-time student passing all assessments will generate 1 S.P.U. and 1 W.S.U., giving the satisfactory ratio of 1. A half-time student proceeding as satisfactorily will generate 0.5 S.P.U. and 0.5 W.S.U., again a ratio of 1; if he fails half his course, he will generate only 0.25 S.P.U. and still 0.5 W.S.U., giving a progress rate of 0.5.

We believe that this basis of collection will not provide great extra work for universities and will enable valid comparisons to be made between institutions, departments or classes of students.

However necessary the collection of statistics may be, they will not by themselves solve the problems of attrition and I want to turn finally to a brief discussion of prevention.

PREVENTION

The reasons why a student leaves university are varied; academic failure, disillusionment, financial difficulties, personal problems, health and so on. The actual decision to leave may be the result of a chance event or the culmination of a series of difficulties. However much information one collects, it is almost impossible to predict which individual student will drop out. Cope and Hannah (1975) remark that almost every investigation that has been made ends with a statement such as "the results of this study again illustrate our inability to predict with any degree of accuracy which students will drop out of college and which will not".

In these circumstances, reliance must be placed on adequate counselling of all types to provide advice and support to students in difficulties. This is particularly important in first year when new students have to cope with the difficult transition from school or work-place to university.

The Williams Report makes recommendations on this problem. R5.20 asks universities to consider ways to improve techniques of learning in the first term and to give more personal attention. It suggests that an individual general tutor for a first year student may be helpful. Some universities (such as Sussex in the U.K.) have a system of personal tutors. Each member of staff has a small group of students to whom he acts as a personal tutor. Naturally the level of care and interest varies considerably, but there is a back-up system of professional counsellors and the system often provides an early warning.

Recommendation R5.21 suggests that universities consider the provision of rehabilitation courses in the summer vacation. Undoubtedly students who fall behind in their academic work face magnified difficulties in the future when they will have to learn new material in addition to catching up on past failures. Such summer courses may help.

A further development which is going to have a big effect on first year syllabuses at university is the increasing variety of syllabuses

at H.S.C. level. It seems that we may no longer be able to assume a basically common knowledge of Mathematics, say, amongst new students, and some more elementary introductory courses may be necessary. In the U.K. some few years ago there were over 50 mathematics syllabuses in the equivalent A-level examinations. In Australia, we seem to be embarking on a similar proliferation.

It is probably impossible, however refined our techniques become, to predict which students are at risk, but it is our responsiblity to minimise difficulties whenever possible and to provide support systems that will give early warning of trouble and enable effective remedial measures to be taken. These remarks are not only governed by compassionate considerations but lead to a more efficient use of our restricted academic resources.

It is easy for us who have lived and worked in universities for years to forget how frightening and inhuman they appear to new students. We have an obligation to the students, to our colleagues and to the taxpayer to take heed of human needs and make our institutions helpful and encouraging in that first year of transitional difficulties.

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STUDIES OF FIRST YEAR STUDENTS AT THE UNIVERSITY OF N.S.W.

J. P. POWELL
TERTIARY EDUCATION RESEARCH CENTRE

INTRODUCTION

This paper draws upon the substantial body of research which has been undertaken at the Tertiary Education Research Centre during the past ten years. Its aim is to provide, in summary form, some background information to assist the conference discussion groups in their deliberations on policy options. More detailed information may be found in the reports which are cited. A broader review of the Australian literature, especially in relation to attrition, has recently been prepared by Eaton (1979).

There is a tendency to suppose that most educational problems spring fully-armed from the ground. It is salutary to bear in mind that the phenomenon of student discontinuation, which will be a major concern of this conference, has been a feature of our universities since their beginnings. This should alert us to the fact that it is thus highly resistant to change. The historian of the University of Melbourne (Scott, 1936) reported that the first intake of students in 1855 was admitted without any test of educational attainment and of the 16 entrants eight dropped out during first year, five continued to the end of second year, and three succeeded in graduating.

SELECTION AND CHOICE OF COURSE

The great majority of students are selected solely on the basis of their performance in the Higher School Certificate examination. Investigations of the relationship between university performance and HSC score indicate that in the region of the cut-off point for entry the HSC is unable to predict success (Katz et al., n.d.). Studies elsewhere (e.g. Baumgart & Johnstone, 1977) have shown little connection between discontinuation and HSC scores.

In recent years an increasing number of older students has been admitted through the mature age unmatriculated entry scheme (Barrett et al., 1980), or with a reduced HSC prescription, or with provisional matriculation which is confirmed when satisfactory performance is demonstrated. A growing number of school-leavers has also been seeking deferred entry for one year. In 1976, for example, 821 applied for deferment, 659 were given it and of these 149 enrolled in the deferred course the following year (Barrett and Powell, 1976).

How do students decide on their choice of course and institution? This is being investigated in relation to first-year students enrolled in Arts, Architecture and Engineering. The results show that 85% consulted their parents but 37% did not consult their teachers or career advisors. Students gave the following, in descending order of importance, as the most useful sources of information: people working in the field, academics, parents or relatives. The least useful were claimed to be vocational guidance and careers reference centres, and school career advisors.

With regard to influences on their choice of course "interested to study in this field" emerged as the major factor. When asked about difficulties encountered in deciding what to do, 30% said they experienced no difficulty, 28% reported choosing between alternatives as being the major problem, and 19% said that they had no clear idea about what they wanted to do on leaving school.

This study has also shown that 75% of students entering Arts, Architecture and Engineering claimed to be in the institution of first choice and 68% to be enrolled in the course of first choice. It is worth noting, however, that only 57% received both institution and course of first choice, and 15% obtained neither institution nor course of first choice.

CHARACTERISTICS

A survey conducted in 1975 (Anderson et al., 1980) showed that entering students were predominantly: male, aged under 20, educated in State schools, came direct from school, lived in capital cities, and had parents located in the upper end of the socio-economic scale. During the past ten years the proportion of female and older students at Australian universities has continued to increase. During that period the proportion of female students has grown from 30% to 42% and the number of students aged over 30 has risen from 13% to 23% (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 1980).

There has also been a tendency for part-time enrolments to grow, probably because of the current employment situation. Severe financial difficulties faced by some students may also have skewed even further the social composition of the student body. It is worth noting that in 1975 only 16% of new students in the national sample had parents in unskilled or semi-skilled employment whereas 55% came from families with managerial or professional backgrounds.

Earlier work on the characteristics of new students has been summarized by Magin (1972):

> ...the typical entering student to this university can be characterized as being eager to attend university; as holding a romantic image of university education... as holding high levels of aspirations (which few will achieve)... In short they are idealistic both in their conceptions of the university and in their estimations of their own potential achievements.

TRANSITION FROM SCHOOL TO UNIVERSITY

Most of the difficulties encountered by students in first year are attributable to problems which arise from the need to adjust to a new environment exhibiting unfamiliar features (Powell, 1979).

Wieneke (1976) has shown that many students enter university with unrealistic expectations and it seems likely that this is often a factor in a decision to discontinue. Of those who entered in 1975, 46% said they intended to proceed to honours (only 15% do so), 27% said they intended to proceed to graduate work (only 12% do so), and 50% did not anticipate any difficulty in coping with study or examinations. In a 1969 survey (Katz et.al., n.d.) of entering students 78% said that they were aiming to obtain a credit or better in all their courses, but 49% managed to pass all their courses in first year and only 7% obtained credit or better in all courses.

There are two other broad indicators of adjustment difficulties and the consequences of unrealistic expectations. In 1978 assistance was sought from student counselling services by 2,792 individuals; presumably many others were in need of help but did not seek it. Only a minority (37%) of students succeeded in graduating in minimum time: this was the percentage of all full-time students who enrolled in universities in 1961 (Australian Vice-Chancellors' Committee, 1971). Of the full-time cohort at UNSW 31.6% graduated in minimum time. There is no reason to suppose that this situation is substantially different today (Wieneke, 1979).

Some students spend a considerable amount of time each day travelling to and from the University. The 1974 Housing Survey showed that 48% were living more than five miles from the campus: 21% spent between two and four hours travelling each day.

Financial difficulties are becoming increasingly acute for many students. In 1979 41% of all university students received some help from the Tertiary Education Assistance Scheme, but only 8% of all university and CAE students received the maximum allowance. It should be noted that this allowance is currently 35% below the official poverty line.

All of these factors feature, to varying degrees, in the lives of the great majority of first year students. For a substantial minority the personal problems to which they give rise prove to be insoluble and they decide not to continue with their enrolment.

DISCONTINUATION

This is a notoriously difficult topic and accurate data tend to be remarkably elusive. For our purposes "discontinuing students" will be defined as those who enrol at the beginning of the year but fail to complete it successfully.

The UNSW data supplied to the Williams Committee survey of the 1971 full-time cohort showed a discontinuation rate of 26% with the bulk of this taking place in first year. The base-line date was 24th May 1971. A large number of students had withdrawn earlier in the year and the extent of this fall-out can be gauged from the 1980 data for Arts,

Architecture and Engineering. These Faculties had an initial enrolment of 1604 students which had been reduced to 1368 by 30th April. Most of these students left to take up places elswhere and the remainder either accepted the offer of a job or withdrew in order to reflect further on what they really wanted to do.

Of the full-time 1971 cohort, 84% of those enrolled at 24th May successfully completed first year. The bulk of discontinuation is not related to poor academic achievement. A survey of the 1969 cohort (Katz et al., n.d.) found no association between academic success and student background characteristics. Another study by Hayes (1974) also found little difference between the reasons given for discontinuation and the problems encountered by students who persisted.

A substantial number of students who successfully complete first-year decide not to re-enrol for the following year. In 1975 there were 700 such students comprising 15% of the cohort. A study by Lewandowski et al. (1977) showed that the main reason was dissatisfaction with the course or aspects of university life, followed by pressures of travel or employment and changes in personal circumstances.

About the only thing that can confidently be said about discontinuation is that its causes are complex and varied. As far as the individual is concerned the decision to discontinue is generally the outcome of an interaction between a number of factors some of which are beyond the ability of either the student or the institution to control.

SUMMARY

For many students their first year at university is substantially different in character from what they had anticipated. Some find the transition from school to be beyond their powers of adaptation and they decide to discontinue quite early. Others struggle along and leave when examinations loom. A substantial number are academically successful but nevertheless decide not to re-enrol the following year.

The phenomenon of discontinuation is extremely complex but there is at least now a substantial body of evidence to indicate that, despite what many academics believe, intellectual capacity does not play a very significant role in its explanation. Choice of course, motivation and the quality of the university experience appear to be the most important factors influencing decisions to withdraw.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thanks are due to Elizabeth de Rome and Chris Wieneke for assembling much of the data on which this paper has drawn.

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PROPOSED SOLUTIONS TO SOME ACKNOWLEDGED PROBLEMS

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Before proceeding to examine some possible solutions to the problems affecting first year students it will be useful to summarize the information which forms the background to the issue. Much of this material has been presented in some detail by previous speakers earlier in the conference.

We know the following.
(1) There is a marked difference between the expectations of first year students and their actual experiences.

(a) Few believe that problems will arise for them.
(b) Their achievement expectations are much higher than actual achievements (all have been successful students at school).

(2) Discontinuation rates are high, the rates varying between faculties.

(3) Students commonly report difficulty in making the transition from school to university. (In a research study of student discontinuations over a two year period conducted by the Counselling Service at the University of Sydney, the largest identifiable group, amounting to nearly one-third of the total, were those who indicated they were not coping at university, chiefly for non-academic reasons.) Transition difficulties have been reported for decades and even though many conferences have been held on the topic little improvement seems to have been achieved.

Some Proposed Solutions

The proposals I am about to outline are not necessarily original. They fall into two main categories (a) those which focus on the student and his/her preparation and (b) those which focus on the university experience.

Focus on the Student

(1) Improved selection methods. This is the most common proposal that one hears. The implication is that students entering universities are not all able enough and that universities should be

more restrictive in their entry requirements. The blame for the poor adjustment to university is placed on the students. It is certainly true that students with very low H.S.C. aggregates have very poor prospects of success, particularly in demanding courses such as engineering, and some faculties have decided not to fill their quotas because they would have been offering places to students with such low prospects. However, it is also well known from retrospective studies that although the raising of entry standards does improve the success rate, it does so at the cost of debarring entry to numbers of potentially successful students. I believe it is too simplistic to accept that raising entry standards is all that is required to improve student success rates. H.S.C. aggregate does have some bearing on success at university but it is but one of a set of complex factors.

(2) Prepare students better. This is another variant of the "if only we had better students" approach. However, it is not always clear in what way the adherents to this view wish students to be better prepared. There is a strong view among some academics that school leavers do not have sufficient knowledge about their subject. Presumably they would like to see additional content in the H.S.C. course to make students better prepared. I do not believe that this is a very productive attitude, since the H.S.C. curriculum is laid down and known to university departments. It is pointless to expect students to be more knowledgeable than the average student pursuing the known H.S.C. course. Any university teaching must use this preparation as its own basis.

Others take the view that schools should prepare students better in study habits and in motivation. It is true that many successful school students do not succeed at university because the study methods followed at school are inappropriate to the demands of university courses. No doubt if they had acquired different study techniques at school they may have made the transition to university more successfully. However, I believe it is reasonable to ask whether or not it is school teachers' responsibility to prepare students for university study. Their responsibility is to all students, and not just those planning university studies, and they probably see their major task to be assisting their students to achieve the highest possible aggregate in the H.S.C. examination. It is probable that they do this quite well. It is even likely that in the process some of them do not develop in their students study methods appropriate to university success. I doubt, however, if they would be persuaded to change their approach for they are achieving what their students and their students' parents want them to achieve.

Another way in which students can be better prepared is to be better informed about university requirements and university life in general. In theory this sounds sensible and anything which can be done to help students be better informed is valuable. In the long run, however, we face the question of whether "knowing about" can replace experience. Many students who go to a lot of trouble to find out a lot about universities still find themselves unprepared for the reality of their experiences. So, although I am not opposed to this notion of helping students to be better informed I guess I am a bit pessimistic about the effectiveness of such efforts.

(3) Change the university entrance system. This is the approach which I believe has the best prospect of achieving our aims. It is, of course, the most difficult to implement, because it requires changes to the whole system of education.

Several years ago a number of us, university counsellors, admissions officers, residential college principals, met informally to discuss the problem of first-year adjustment and we finally prepared a report recommending that the H.S.C. be held in July or August. The purpose of this was to allow more time for decision making before students committed themselves to any action - whether they intended tertiary studies or not. We felt that if these students remained at school for a term following their H.S.C., and after receiving their results, the schools could materially assist them to prepare for the next stage in their lives whether that stage was employment or further study. I still believe this is a sound plan as it is designed to benefit all students, not just university entrants, and because it would allow the schools to take seriously the widely accepted aim of schooling as "education for life". Currently the demands of the H.S.C. examination dominate all else.

It goes without saying that this recommendation was not accepted by the education authorities. Another version of this approach and one probably easier to implement is to start the university in June.

All these suggestions stem from the recognition that the H.S.C. and by implication university entrance requirements dominate the secondary school curricula. The H.S.C. is required to act both as a certificate of completion of a secondary school program and as a university entrance examination. The two requirements are by no means compatible and I do not believe that we can expect both purposes to be served adequately. One way of breaking this connection would be to hold the H.S.C. examination at the end of year 11 and to hold a separate tertiary entrance examination for those who wished to proceed to tertiary studies at the end of year 12. This approach would be similar in principle to the Matriculation Colleges in Tasmania and the advantage would lie in the unambiguous nature of the course of study - avowedly to prepare for tertiary studies. The colleges and universities may not like this approach on economic grounds as it would probably cost them money for the conduct and marking of the examinations, but on educational grounds it is difficult to argue against it.

A couple of other possible solutions are worth mentioning for your discussion. (a) Let the universities have a general first semester, probably one for science based courses and one for humanities, before students are selected for entry to the wide range of degree courses. Again this would be easier to organise than a change to the whole secondary education system and would have the advantage of postponing major decisions until after a period of university study. (b) Make every school leaver have at least one year break between school and university. Personally I would oppose such a requirement as there is no control over what happens in that year and no guarantee that students would be any better prepared for university studies. Universities already allow a voluntary deferment; I do not believe

that making it compulsory would be in students' best interests.

Focus on the University

The attitude behind many of the suggestions made in the previous section implicitly expresses the view "give us better students and we will give them the same treatment and achieve better results". It seems to me just as reasonable to suggest "give us the same students and we will give them a different treatment and achieve better results". If one adopts the latter view then one must determine what constitutes a "different treatment".

First let me say that I believe a good case can be made for proposing a different treatment. For decades educationists have been concerned that the correlation between H.S.C. results and first-year university examinations rarely exceeds .6 and is usually lower than that. We know that intelligence test scores do not add to the size of the correlation because intelligence is but part of the common variance making up both sets of scores, along with other factors such as work habits, verbal and quantitative skills, and some unspecified personality factors. Everyone who gives advice to school leavers warns them that university is different (again often unspecified). If it is so different why do we expect high correlations between school and university results, if university were no different from high school (and some dissatisfied students complain that it is not) then we would probably achieve higher correlation coefficients but would feel that our institutions of higher learning were not worthy of the name of university. Again if university is so different then we should be identifying the differences and helping students adjust to them - the first step in the "different treatment".

Proposal 1. Each department teaching first-year students should be involved in teaching or organising programs on skill acquisition (e.g. note-taking, use of library, preparing assignments, practical work, getting the most from tests etc). The focus needs to be on HOW TO, and could include how to carry out research in which staff members discussed their own research. In this way some enthusiasm for the subject would be demonstrated and some appropriate models would be available for students. Most important in the proposal is that staff involvement needs to convey the message to students that they want to help them acquire the skills necessary for success. (It is interesting to contrast the treatment afforded highly selected athletes, such as Olympic competitors. Despite the excellence of these athletes, coaches still work hard at helping them to improve their performances. Our highly selected students are expected to learn how to improve by themselves, otherwise they are discarded as failures).

Proposal 2. Ideally each first-year student should belong to one group of no more than ten to twelve people meeting regularly for a definite purpose. The focus of the group should be on a task not on a problem and the group should not be voluntary but part of course requirements. Our experience in working with academic departments is that voluntary groups for such students as those with poor first term results are not well attended. Students are reluctant to admit to

"needing" to attend such groups. On the other hand when attendance is required results are much better. (The Faculty of Engineering at Sydney University in association with the Department of Mathematics has required over the past two years all students who have completed only a 2-unit course in H.S.C. mathematics to attend a special tutorial.) The effect of this requirement has been a noticeable increase in the number of these students passing their mathematics course. (I am confident that it also had the effect of indicating to the students that the Department and the Faculty was concerned for their welfare.)

Proposal 3. The universities' policies for promotion should be seen to value teaching and organisation of special programs for first-year students. In theory this policy does exist in most universities but in practice it does not operate - unless the staff member is close to retirement. Publicity (and recognition) should be given to individual staff members' activities (e.g. by such means as articles in university newspapers and other publications).

Proposal 4. Senior university bodies or personnel should make it clear that they regard as highly important, steps taken by academic departments to assist first-year students adjust to university. It should be made clear that although academic content is important so is a focus on the learner and on the process of helping in the learning task.

Proposal 5. Each department, or faculty where appropriate, should be provided regularly with information about the number of students who discontinue. This information would enable each department to become aware of any changes in its discontinuation rate and also to relate its rate to a university norm, or, in large faculties, to a faculty norm. Departments should be expected to justify high rates of discontinuation. This does not imply necessarily that a department's attitude to students causes high rates of discontinuation. It may be, for example, that students have a false impression of what the subject entails. Feedback of discontinuation rates would at least allow a problem to be identified and a cause sought so that appropriate steps can be taken to improve the situation.

It is my experience in talking to some staff members in departments with high enrolments, that they find it difficult to be too serious about their teaching in the first few weeks of the year. They indicate that they are waiting until the expected drop out rate improves the staff-student ratio. Their attitude seems to be one of encouraging student discontinuation for their own sakes. It would not be surprising if this attitude was conveyed to students as one of not caring.

Proposal 6. Greater use should be made of the examination system as an aid to learning rather than simply as a form of assessment. In the survey of discontinuing students at Sydney University, to which I referred earlier, respondents were asked whether there was anything the University could have done which would have helped them. The two most common responses from among those who indicated they were not coping (the largest group) was (a) reduce the impersonality they experienced and (b) improve the assessment system so that it did not

create so much distance between staff and students.

Finally I should like to emphasise that behind all these proposals is the importance of changing the emphasis in the university. Simply expressed this is a change from obstruction to collaboration. The common situation experienced by students is one in which obstacles are placed in their paths and the demands are that they prove their worth by overcoming them. In this situation "worth" is often extended by the student to mean personal worth as apart from academic worth and the experience for the student who is judged not worthy is destructive and damaging rather than rewarding and uplifting.

I believe we should be striving to create the situation where students experience staff as partners and where the prevailing attitude is experienced as "let's work together to achieve success".

DISCUSSION GROUP REPORTS

The main work of the conference took place in small discussion groups. Each group was assigned a broad topic for discussion and asked to identify problems and to produce a range of solutions.

The five topics were:

1. Pre-enrolment issues.
2. Non-academic transition problems.
3. Academic transition problems.
4. The function of the first year course.
5. Educational responsibilities of universities.

Each group prepared a report on their discussion and nominated a member to join a Working Party, which had the task of considering the reports and formulating proposals for action within the University.

The group reports follow.

DISCUSSION GROUP 1

PRE-ENROLMENT ISSUES

The Issues

1. The dissemination of information.

   Prospective students often suffer from information overload and confusion. This is becoming more of a problem as competition increases between and within institutions for student numbers.

2. Preparation for decision making.

   Decisions as to which course and at which institution a student will enrol tend to be made in a crisis atmosphere during the short period between the announcement of the HSC results and the enrolment dates.

3. Assistance in making the final decision.

   A variety of measures need to be taken to assist students in making their final decision in that period after the HSC when they are no longer the responsibility of the school nor yet a part of any tertiary institution.

4. Provision of information concerning employment prospects.

   The difficulty of accurately predicting employment prospects in the future poses additional problems for students choosing university courses.

Proposals

The work group discussed a variety of ways in which problems arising in relation to these four basic issues could be minimised. It was recognised that the university cannot and should not dictate to secondary schools on these issues. However the university should accept some responsibility for assisting prospective students prior to enrolment.

1. - Course and institutional advertising should be consistent with guidelines suggested by the AVCC, and co-ordinated between and within institutions. (e.g. Computer Science may be studied at the University of New South Wales in the Faculties of Science, Engineering or Commerce; at the University of Sydney in the Faculties of .....etc.)

   - Students should be advised of the need to retain a wide subject base in their HSC studies relevant to their interests in tertiary courses.

2. - The limited time available for effective decision making after the HSC may be offset by improving students personal awareness and decision making abilities via such secondary school programs as career education, personal development etc. Universities should encourage and support the expansion of training programmes for the provision of Career Advisors in all schools.

- Career Education programmes should be encouraged to aim at developing student abilities to assimilate information, to clarify personal values and goals and to develop a greater awareness of training and career possibilities.

- Students need to be assisted to develop more realistic expectations of university life and study. Some suggested ways of achieving this were films on transition and university life, and programmes which give students direct experience through visits to a campus. Some caution was advised with regard to the latter, as some students may be unnecessarily overawed by the academic level of material unless the lectures they attended were carefully selected.

3. - The establishment of a Vocational Orientation Centre such as that based on RMIT in Melbourne was considered. Such a service, based on UCAC, could be staffed by advisors and counsellor seconded from the various tertiary institutions during the December/ February period.

- Schools and Faculties within UNSW should be encouraged to increase their support for advisory services available to students in the December/February period.

- The University needs to increase contact and support for the District Career Counselling Centres.

- The HSC should not be the sole nor ultimate arbitor on a student's acceptability for a particular course. For example, in Social Work and Medicine personal suitability should also be considered a factor.

4. - Students must be made aware of the unreliability of manpower planning estimates and counselled to put employment prospects in perspective in terms of their own abilities and interests.

- The Student Employment and Scholarships Unit should be expanded to include career counselling for prospective and enrolled students as well as final year students.

DISCUSSION GROUP 2

NON-ACADEMIC TRANSITION PROBLEMS

The Issues

It was noted that many problems encountered by students coming to university are related to the life stage they are passing through, i.e., adolescence-early adulthood or career change later in life. However, becoming a student at university frequently produces additional problems which include:

- Anxiety due to the student's failure to appreciate academic requirements. This is frequently aggravated by the failure of staff to clarify those requirements.
- Confusion about, and failure in meeting academic demands, often leads to a reduction in self-esteem and may be interpreted by the individual as a reflection on his/her adequacy as a person.
- Inappropriate expectations about University in general by both students and their parents.
- Having to form new and different types of relationships.
- Breaking up of old relationships - friends, sometimes family.
- Students developing in ways which lead them away from their families and the guilt that that occasions.
- Balancing a number of new roles - university student, part-time worker, pauper (relative to school friends who work).
- Feelings of anonymity and of being overawed.
- Financial problems are increasingly affecting students; (the value and scope of TEAS, the shortage of part-time work); lack of money produces physical and psychological problems.
- Minority groups encounter special problems e.g., mature age students may not appreciate the personal/family costs of becoming a student (this may become a greater problem if universities seek to admit larger numbers of mature age students).
- Other students needing special assistance include overseas students, refugees, first generation migrant students and students seeking a second career.

Preamble

The study group noted that;

The university's requirements and the need to maximise the students' HSC aggregate dominate the school system;

The present interval between publication of HSC results and the offer of places and enrolment in a course, frequently force students to make ill-informed judgments. There must be some intervention between school and university to provide increased time and assistance to students making career/course choices, in addition to providing experiences which will assist them make a smooth transition from school to university.

It seems an opportune time to put forward proposals to aid students make this transition. A number of changes are currently occurring which should provide the opportunity as well as actually encourage such developments, e.g., the development of careers advisers and career education in the secondary schools; increased awareness and questioning of discontinuation and failure rates within the university under encouragement by the Williams' Report and The Universities Council of the TEC; gradual decentralisation of financing and decision making to the Faculties.

Although the group saw decided advantages in proposals to put back the HSC exam to either the middle or beginning of Year 12 thereby providing time for attention it was thought that this would have little chance of success since it (i) involves a major re-structuring of the school system throughout the state; (ii) parents may be unwilling to leave their children in school when they were not receiving formal instruction; (iii) teacher groups might be expected to oppose such a move because of the decreased time available to cover the syllabus.

1. Changes to first year university courses.

The study group considered three possible changes which would increase the time interval between HSC result and commitment to a particular course in the university:

- Common courses for Arts/Humanities and Science/Engineering students with enrolment in a specific degree program at the end of Session 1.

- Parallel courses in each Faculty to assist students in making the transition.

- An introductory phase in each subject unit to orient and prepare students for study in that discipline.

It was thought that the third alternative had the greatest chance of success since it could be introduced on a school or faculty basis rather than a university-wide basis.

2. Other proposals for action to be taken at the school or faculty level are as follows:

   1. All first year units should

      - Offer an introduction to the basic philosophy or methodology of the subject, i.e., focus on solving problems rather than facts.

      - Take steps to orient students to the discipline and its importance and relationship to other disciplines.

      - Place greater emphasis on small group teaching to encourage personal involvement and interaction particularly in the early stages when students are first learning about the discipline.

      Such changes in first year teaching have obvious implications for staff training and selection; service units such as TERC and SCRU could assist staff develop appropriate teaching methods.

   2. Wherever possible students should have a personal tutor whose task would be to maintain contact with a small group of students and show interest in the individual's general adjustment to university. The personal tutor would deal with the student's everyday concerns and refer where necessary to the other student services on campus.

   3. Administrative and computer record keeping procedures should be adjusted to routinely supply information concerning students withdrawing from courses. The information should

      - Be regularly supplied to Directors of post year courses to encourage schools and faculties to review their courses and procedures.

      - Be available for research on the factors contributing to withdrawal.

   4. Representations should be made to the Federal Government to increase the value and availability of living allowances under the TEAS Scheme.

   5. The university should attempt to increase the funds available for urgent short-term loans to students.

DISCUSSION GROUP 3

ACADEMIC TRANSITION PROBLEMS

Proposals

1. Visits by school students to campus.

   Make better use of the opportunity to introduce students to the campus,

   e.g. - Invite students to sit in on lectures and tutorials

   - Organise laboratory displays (as is done in the School of Physics).

2. Encourage deferment of offer.

   Make deferment of offer an equally acceptable alternative to acceptance of offer. At present it is almost a footnote to the offer form.

   - Invite students who have deferred to attend lectures and tutorials.
   - Allow students to defer up to say 4 weeks after commencement of session.
   - Keep students who have deferred in touch with the University during the year by invitation to functions.

3. Publicise idea that length of course is minimum time for graduation.

   With changes in the HSC students are not evenly prepared for 1st year university courses and more are undertaking bridging courses. Students are taking longer than the minimum period to graduate (only 37% graduate in minimum time) so their expectations should be modified. It should not be regarded as a disgrace to take longer than the minimum time. Weaker students should be encouraged to take lighter programmes. Others could be advised to reduce their loads to enable them to obtain better grades.

4. Orientation week to be expanded.

   Students to be encouraged to attend an expanded orientation week by issuing timetables, arranging tutorials and laboratories during the period. The programme to be organised by schools and departments and to include say, 2 days on study skills, and incorporate present arrangements including Vice-Chancellor's welcome.

5. Interview students at risk.

   Based on mid-session tests and assignments, students to be interviewed on a school or department basis to ascertain problem areas and to be referred to resource agencies or to remedial classes.

6. Move back date for withdrawal from 1 session subjects.

   At present students may withdraw without penalty at the end of teaching week 7 for Session 1 and end of teaching week 6 for Session 2. This should be moved back to the end of week 9 to allow students to make a considered decision after receipt of mid-session test results and the subsequent interview (item 5).

7. Remedial duties.

One staff member from each department to be responsible for first year remedial work; teaching load to make provision for remedial workshops and personal tuition; greater use to be made of audio-visual packages for remedial situation.

8. Lecturer in the use of English.

La Trobe University have appointed one lecturer to each of the Faculties of Arts and Economics; sole function is to help students improve their written work; no formal lecturing; students assisted individually or in small groups; students are referred by their lecturers or tutors. Such appointments are recommended for such Faculties as Arts, Commerce, Law and Professional Studies.

9. Resource agencies to be more visible to staff and students.

Student counsellors could be attached to individual faculties and attend meetings and functions - others including medical officers, loans officer, housing officer, chaplains, etc. to be more visible in the Faculties.

10. Exit formula.

To be tightened up; interview students before leaving; contact students who fail to attend mid-session tests or hand in assignments.

On student discontinuation form provide boxes for typical reasons for discontinuation.

Correct Enrolment Form to be returned by all students and regarded as an application to sit for the examination.

Better liaison between schools and Administration re students who withdraw.

DISCUSSION GROUP 4

THE FUNCTION OF THE FIRST YEAR COURSE

Personal Comment: this group concentrated on the first year course and the first year students, and did not, as many other groups appeared to have done, follow the opening address to concentrate on the students who leave during the first year.

The Group identified six problem areas, and within those areas some specific problems.

1. Identification

   (a) Student identification.

   In many cases, the students know what they are identifying as, e.g. mechanical engineer, physicist, etc., but there is no recognition within the system. The student is lumped with many others in common first year subjects. Often, these subjects show little relevance to the student's aim.

   (b) Staff identification.

   In most courses, the staff cannot identify the particular group of students or individual student that they should be assisting, e.g. most professional courses teach only one subject, if that, in the first year.

   Possible Solutions

   (a) Is the common first year still necessary?

   (b) Should general subjects, e.g. Chemistry IA, Maths I, be given or specific servicing courses using maths personnel be designed for Year I, leaving due general courses only for the general Science and Arts. (It would reduce numbers and identify and make identifiable many more students.)

   N.B. This brings into question the relevance of much of the content of many first year subjects.

2. Student Attitudes

   This arose out of 1. As first year students are largely unidentifiable, there is a corresponding lack of information about their attitudes. Some attempts have been made to determine why first year students leave, but very few attempts to what the total population of first year students think.

(a) Information available - student attitudes.

Much information is available but always in a form difficult to obtain or quantify or use. Perhaps its greatest fault is that it is peripheral, not sought for the purpose for which it could now be used.

Some sources include:

Counter Handbooks;

TERC studies (if aggregated);

Counselling reports;

Student/Staff Committees;

Personal records of staff (especially tutors);

(b) Student attitudes - solution.

A survey to fill the 'information' gap. It should be

(i) A faculty or larger school to provide sufficient numbers, e.g. Arts or Science, Maths or Chemistry.

(ii) Its use should be the basis of forward planning by that body to assist and retain first year students.

(iii) The personnel should be from the faculty, with the expertise of TERC.

(iv) The method used being both an attitudinal survey; one to provide 'hard' data.

(v) The lead time is expected to be 12 months.

(vi) The cost would be about $12-15,000 (a research assistant for the time). This to be met partly by this institution's funds and from outside funding.

This should give some ideas, particularly about the relevance of much of the content of subjects and the subjects within courses.

3. Aims of First Year

(a) The group considered that all subject (and if necessary, course) aims should be specified and stated.

(b) The statement of aims should be in the handbooks, in handouts and restated in the first lectures.

(c) That in the case of servicing courses the aims should be derived by consultation between the servicing body and the serviced body.

4. Objectives

The limited experience of the group suggested that students often do not know specific objectives and similarly standards that are derived from them. Often interested (serviced) staff do not know or cannot determine such objectives. Yet this is the area which relates most to course and subject content.

(a) Objectives must be stated precisely to the students and given in 'hard copy' so that the student may refer to them at any time.

(b) The objectives will probably fall into two major groupings:

those that require mastery

those requiring awareness.

This, it is hoped, will give the students a better understanding of the standard required in first year.

(c) The formulation of objectives will require, in many cases, the re-examination of the content of many subjects.

(d) Not only should the content be examined for relevance to the stated objectives, but also to the amount of content (the group felt that many students may be caught in the information explosion).

(e) Objectives of a non-traditional nature should be included, especially those related to methods that would assist in the university system of learning.

This section, the group hoped, would give the first year student a greater awareness of the direction that staff envisaged courses/subjects taking, the type and amount of content required and the standard to which they expected students would learn this content. (The subject of mathematics was long discussed in this context.)

5. Teaching Methods

It was felt by the group that this could not be separated from staffing as staff attitudes, experience and resources were indivisibly combined with this area.

(a) Teaching methods types.

(i) There is nothing sacred about the traditional lecture/tutorial/laboratory method.

(ii) Many other methods are known and indeed practised within any tertiary institution.

(iii) There is no best method, but some methods are more appropriate/successful in some areas than others and often more so than the traditional method.

(iv) First year teaching units, which perhaps should be the leaders in teaching methods, have often become the bases of efficient administration of Year I rather than education bodies.

(v) Different aims/objectives require different teaching methods.

(b) Teaching Methods - suggestions.

(i) Staff attitudes will need to be altered. Too often and with good promotional/recognitional reasons, teaching is relegated to an inferior role.

(ii) It was felt that any teaching method would fail unless the staff involved believed in the method and were convinced of its potential success. That will have to be developed.

(iii) First year students should be exposed to a variety of teaching methods; too often, the present uniformity is stultifying.

(iv) First year students should be exposed to small group teaching with good 'teachers' convinced of this method's usefulness.

(v) All staff should be made more aware of the teaching methods available. Some suggestions were:

- teaching training for 'new' members of staff;
- more seminars, workshops on teaching methods at faculty, school, etc., level; rather than institution level;
- expanded TERC activity in this area;
- publicity of teaching methods and their success/failure in the institution, e.g. through P.A.U.;
- encouragement and recognition from Heads of School and the University of the importance of teaching in professional advancement.

6. Difficulties

Many difficulties were discussed but it was felt that the methods to overcome these was the task of the group.

Some difficulties are:

(i) Funding will always be a problem even to fill data gaps.

(ii) Additional funding to first year teaching resources require a shift from latter year teaching.

(iii) Staff allocation to first year is usually a case of 'the sick, the lame and the junior'. Too often first year teaching is left to the least experienced of the permanent staff with the assistance of untrained part-time or temporary staff - it's cheaper.

(iv) Senior staff rarely show an interest in first year teaching, other staff recognise this and copy it, students recognise it and resent it.

(v) Students who are successful are trained by the system to work only for assessment and this will be difficult to change.

And many more.

Conclusions

Any recommendations made must be accepted with the awareness that the group felt constrained by the lack of information on students' attitudes. It is strongly recommended that this gap be filled with information specifically sought for this purpose. This information must not only be obtained from leavers or potential leavers, but should also be obtained from both the 'stayers' and the successful (the latter year students). In this way, it may be of use in assisting the development of first year courses/subjects which are not only more relevant to their disciplines but also more rewarding and even exciting. In this manner, the University may become more satisfying for both student and staff.

It follows that most of the recommendations must relate to staff and their function and attitudes in first year courses. As the staff, collectively, are the University it is pertinent to say that such problems as were identified are the problems of the University and it is, again collectively, the responsibility of the University to attempt to find solutions and implement them. Perhaps it would be appropriate for any survey of the students to be controlled by one of the staff and the results associated so that a mutual set of aims and objectives may be evolved which would better serve by directing efforts toward both more efficient teaching methods and staffing, which would then be recognised by all professional levels.

DISCUSSION GROUP 5

THE EDUCATIONAL RESPONSIBILITIES OF UNIVERSITIES

- What are the educational responsibilities of universities to first year students?
- Constraints on attempts to reduce attrition.
- Factors influencing acceptance of high attrition.

Group 5's brief was very wide, and it was decided to summarise the results of its discussions under two heads; constraints upon attempts to reduce attrition, and responsibilities of universities to first year students.

Constraints

At least two plenary speakers at the conference stressed the difficulties which any proposals to reduce first year attrition rates would face. The group explored these difficulties:

- The teaching responsibilities of universities have never been spelt out, except in the most general terms, and teaching policy is rarely coherently considered, except on occasion at the School (or Department) level.
- Traditionally, teaching has occupied a minor role in universities, in terms of prestige if not of the working hours and other resources given to it.
- There are few incentives in universities towards good teaching; notably, promotion is independent of teaching contribution or competence.
- Teacher-training is not considered necessary for university staff, and training facilities (even of the crash-course variety) are not widely available, nor strongly promoted when available.
- Staff frequently take a cynical view of first-year teaching, particularly in subjects which attract large numbers. Attrition is actually expected and welcomed by some staff.
- The financing of teaching is based on enrolment figures. There is no incentive in this regard to examine discontinuation rates closely.

- Universities tend to fear unfavourable media publicity resulting from the collection, analysis and publication of discontinuation data.

- Universities lack adequate data on the reasons overall for discontinuation.

- There are difficulties in obtaining such data, including the reluctance of students to be frank about their reasons for discontinuation on any signed form or questionnaire, and the difficulty of contacting 'drop-out' students, many of whom are highly transient.

- There are social and parental pressures upon students to enrol in courses or subjects which appear to offer good career prospects but which may not suit the aptitudes of particular students.

- Many students do not have adequate financial support. A significant proportion (possibly around 50%) of those students completing discontinuation forms now give "financial difficulties" as the reason for discontinuing their courses.

Responsibilities

- A university has the responsibility to offer first year students the best possible introductions to the disciplines in which the university engages. A first-year course should be designed partly to excite interest in the relevant discipline and in the current contribution it is making to human knowledge. A first-year course should not merely provide elementary 'pre-requisite' information.

- Universities should accept as their responsibility the need to reverse the current tendency (in Australia) for first year teaching to be seen as a chore, undertaken by junior and temporary staff. Senior academic staff should be encouraged to engage in first year teaching. First year teaching should offer the kind of learning experience third and fourth year students enjoy.

- Universities should be responsible for seeing that entrance criteria guarantee adequate preparation for study at university. Where difficulties arise in this regard, universities should see that staff are kept fully informed of High School syllabus content. Where any doubt exists as to the knowledge and skills of entering students, tests should be conducted to determine these before first-year teaching proceeds. It was noted that many university staff may be of overseas or interstate origin, and may not therefore be familiar with the school experience of their students.

- Universities should be responsible for instituting teacher-training in lecturing and small-group-teaching skills, and possibly make this compulsory for first-appointment teaching staff. Even brief courses on "mistakes to avoid" could be useful in this regard.

- Universities should accept responsibility for helping first-year students identify with the institution they have entered, possibly through better allocation of teaching resources to first-year subjects, so that greater personal contact is effected between students and teachers.

- Universities should accept the responsibility for seeing that entering students receive adequate information and counselling about study methods and subject content at university level.

- Universities should be responsible for monitoring the progress of students through their courses.

- Universities should systematically collect and analyse data on discontinuing students, if necessary appointing one or two officers in Student Records sections for this purpose. Their duties should include the collection and analysis of formal discontinuation data, and liaison with Schools (Departments) and individual staff members regarding informal "drop-outs". Discontinuing students should be asked in detail about their reasons for discontinuation with measures being taken to preserve the anonymity of their replies. The collected and analysed data should be regularly circulated to and considered by Faculties and Schools (Departments).

- Universities should accept a role in seeking to ensure that students receive adequate financial assistance during their studies, through either grants or loans or both.

REPORT OF THE WORKING PARTY

MEMBERSHIP

Dr I.D. Black, School of History
Dr D.J. Boud, Tertiary Education Research Centre (Convenor)
Dr B.D. Burke, Acting Head, Student Counselling & Research Unit
Mr E.P. Eyland, School of Physics
Ms E.A. de Rome, Tertiary Education Research Centre
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INTRODUCTION

In recent years the plight of students in transition from secondary to tertiary education has become a focus of serious concern.

It is during the first year at university, when students are introduced to the demands of study in higher education, that the rate of student attrition is highest. It is also in the first year that the greatest demands are placed on teaching staff.

Concern about the issues involved in first year university studies was affirmed by the Report on Education, Training and Employment (Williams Committee, 1979), whose recommendations included:

R.18: The Committee recommends that the Universities Council and the universities discuss a date by which relevant information on attrition be provided in triennial submissions, that the Universities Council and the Australian Vice-Chancellors' Committee appoint a working party to review the information and that the Tertiary Education Commission then help to finance relevant research projects as part of its new program of evaluative studies.

5.20: The Committee recommends that opportunities be made during first term for new students to improve their techniques of learning. The Murray Committee was critical of arrangements for first year teaching and although there was a redistribution of teaching duties in favour of first year students, more personal attention is still needed. Much good might come from an extension of the practice in some universities of allocating each first year student to a "general tutor".

In response to the first of these recommendations the AVCC set up a Working Party on Attrition and Graduation Rates.

At the University of New South Wales concern had been expressed by staff about the need to examine some of the issues relating to first year at university. In response to this the Tertiary Education Research Centre devoted its annual conference in June 1980 to this theme and invited Professor J.F. Scott, Chairman of the AVCC Working Party, and Vice-Chancellor of La Trobe University, to open the conference.

During the conference the need was recognised to build upon the discussions which were taking place by the preparation of a set of specific recommendations for consideration by the University of New South Wales. A Working Party was established composed of people who have direct experience of teaching, administration, counselling and research at the first year level. The aim of this Working Party was to identify issues and to prepare and submit recommendations to the University on particular matters related to first year studies. The Working Party took as its starting point the problems and recommendations which had been presented by the discussion groups at the plenary session of the conference. The Working Party then elaborated those on which there was general consensus and translated them into a form which could be considered more widely within the University. While there was agreement

on the importance of all the issues which are listed below it was recognised that not all problems are equally applicable to all parts of the University, to all staff or to all students. Caution should therefore be exercised in relating a particular issue to a particular course or group.

PRE-ENROLMENT

Issues

Prospective students often suffer from information overload about courses, careers and institutions. This may be aggravated by the uncoordinated dissemination of information both within and between institutions. The situation is getting worse with the increased competition for highly qualified students.

Although career and course counselling for school leavers has improved markedly over the last few years it is still inadequate. Unfortunately some tertiary institutions actively recruit students when they claim they are counselling them.

Prospective students frequently base their choice of course or career on unreliable information regarding employment prospects for graduates.

There is little time for effective decision-making between the publication of HSC results and the closing date for UCAC applications. In addition, students during this critical period are not the direct responsibility of their school or any particular institution.

Recommendations

1. Information about courses and institutions should be consistent with the guidelines suggested by the AVCC, and coordinated both within and between institutions.

2. Career/course counselling should be widely available in all secondary schools both before and during Year 12. The training of Careers Advisers in the schools needs to be encouraged and supported by the University.

3. The University should assist in the further development of career education courses in schools at least in Years 11 and 12. These courses, which have already been started on a small scale, should be designed to enable students to evaluate information, develop a greater awareness of training and career possibilities, and clarify their personal values and career goals.

4. Information about current and predicted employment prospects for graduates should be made available to school leavers. Career Education programs should include current input from the Commonwealth Employment Service on job opportunities. Students must be warned

of the difficulties involved in accurately predicting future employment trends and of the need to balance employment prospects against their own abilities and interests.

5. The University should continue to provide, and seek ways of improving career counselling for incoming and enrolled students, as well as for final year students.

6. Measures need to be taken to assist school leavers in the period between taking the HSC examination and the closing date for the change of preferences for UCAC places. In particular, the establishment of a Vocational Orientation Centre (similar to that in Melbourne) should be investigated. Such a Centre would aid in the coordination of information from various institutions, provide career and course advice in relation to specific institutions, and include what information is available concerning employment prospects. The Centre could be linked to UCAC, with advisers and counsellors being seconded from the various institutions during appropriate times each year; it would be useful if this were done in liaison with the Careers Reference Centre.

7. Until the provision of such a centralised service Schools and Faculties within UNSW should be encouraged to provide increased support to the advisory services available to students during Information Days, during the enrolment period and at other times.

TEACHING, LEARNING AND ADJUSTMENT IN THE FIRST YEAR

Issues

Students react in a variety of ways to the experience of first year at the University; similarly, the provision made by the Schools is varied. It is not possible to identify issues which apply to all students or to all Schools. However, there are issues which need to be considered by many Schools and staff have much to learn from the study of the best practices of their colleagues. Some of the major issues are:

- The sense of alienation many first-year students feel in first-year subjects, particularly in those offered by mass lecture and in "servicing" subjects.

- Inadequate consideration of the aims and appropriateness of first-year syllabuses, and inadequate explanation to students of the aims of first-year syllabuses.

- Poor teaching by unsuitable or inexperienced lecturers or tutors. Lack of training in teaching skills.

- Low status accorded to first-year teaching. Relative lack of funding and staffing vis a vis later year courses.

- Students are making a personal and social transition from adolescence into young adulthood as well as an academic transition. Problems of personal identity and social adjustment are of concern to students and frequently affect academic progress.

Recommendations

8. First year subjects should not merely focus on the transmission of "facts" and skills which might be needed for later subjects. A first-year subject should include in its syllabus an introduction to the basic philosophy and methodology of the discipline concerned. It should be designed, at least partly, to excite interest in the discipline and in the contribution it has made, and currently is making, to human knowledge.

9. In all shared first-year programs there ought to be material clearly identifiable by students as related to their particular course goals.

10. Steps need to be taken to see that all first-year staff are kept fully informed of High School syllabus content, where first-year subjects assume prior knowledge. Where doubt exists as to the particular knowledge and skills of entering students, appropriate tests could be conducted to determine these before teaching proceeds, so that remedial action can be taken.

11. All Schools should review their curriculum and teaching methods in first year subjects in order to ensure that there is not too much of a gap between entry knowledge and skills, and the demands made particularly in the early weeks of courses.

12. The identification and interviewing of students "at risk" of not completing a subject with a view to remedial action, should be regarded as part of the teaching duties and teaching load of first-year staff.

13. The value of small-group teaching in diminishing alienation and in promoting interaction between students and staff, and between students, needs to be recognised. Small-group teaching, in a ratio not greater than 1:10, should play an important role in any first-year subject and staff should be deployed to provide this.

14. Consideration to be given by all Schools to provide members of staff who will act as general tutors, to take an interest in individual students, monitor their progress and aid them in their adjustment to the University environment. Staff members taking this role would need to be sympathetic volunteers and it is essential that recognition be given to these activities in determining teaching loads. Tutors should be based in the "home" School or Faculty of the students wherever possible.

15. Consideration should be given to the University conducting a pilot study in conjunction with student bodies and particular Schools of the feasibility of establishing a School-based peer support system in which senior students assist first-year students in adjusting to the University environment both academically and socially.

16. Senior academics to be more involved in the teaching of first-year subjects; teaching in these subjects should not be relegated primarily to junior staff.

17. The University should devise means to encourage the flow of funds towards first-year teaching, and to provide recognition for significant contributions to first-year teaching.

18. Courses in lecturing and in small-group teaching skills to be provided by the University, and made mandatory in the case of first appointments without previous teaching experience.

INFORMATION, RECORDS AND RESEARCH

Issues

- Information about the numbers of students who discontinue formally and informally is not readily available in a useable form. It is therefore difficult to assess the extent of the problem.

- Information about students' reasons for leaving is also difficult to obtain in a useful format. The research information which is available tends to be general rather than specific to particular courses or subjects, limiting its practical usefulness.

- There is a need for research at the School level into the relationships between teaching methods, course structure and content, students' attitudes and attrition.

Recommendations

19. The Confirmation of Enrolment Form should be used as a means of identifying students who have dropped out. All students would be required to return the Form in order to register to sit for the examinations. Examination registration lists would be published along with the timetables. Students should be informed of the implications of failing to inform the University when they withdraw, for example, that subject failures will be recorded on their university record.

20. Withdrawing students might be offered incentives to do so formally. For example, one incentive could be a letter of "good standing" stating that the student has left of his or her own accord.

21. Discontinuation forms to include a list of common reasons for deciding to leave university. Students to be asked to indicate those which apply to them.

22. Student Records to be responsible for the collection, routine analysis, and presentation of data relating to discontinuation of courses.

23. Schools and Student Records Section to explore ways of maintaining closer liaison, with respect to the notification of student discontinuation.

24. Schools to routinely interview students who appear to be at risk of not completing a subject. Students who fail, who neglect to sit for a mid-session examination or to hand in a major assignment or regularly to attend classes. Standardised records to be kept on informal discontinuation for research purposes.

25. Information on discontinuation rates and reasons to be routinely circulated to and considered by Faculties and Schools. In particular, the Directors of First Year subjects should regularly receive this information to encourage the review of subjects and procedures.